

There is a certain type of argument which, in fact, is not an argument, but a means of forestalling debate and extorting an opponent's agreement with one's undiscussed notions. It is a method of bypassing logic by means of psychological pressure . . . [It] consists of threatening to impeach an opponent's character by means of his argument, thus impeaching the argument without debate. Example: "Only the immoral can fail to see that Candidate X's argument is false." . . . The falsehood of his argument is asserted arbitrarily and offered as proof of his immorality.

In today's epistemological jungle, that second method is used more frequently than any other type of irrational argument. It should be classified as a logical fallacy and may be designated as "The Argument from Intimidation."

The essential characteristic of the Argument from Intimidation is its appeal to moral self-doubt and its reliance on the fear, guilt or ignorance of the victim. It is used in the form of an ultimatum demanding that the victim renounce a given idea without discussion, under threat of being considered morally unworthy. The pattern is always: "Only those who are evil (dishonest, heartless, insensitive, ignorant, etc.) can hold such an idea."

"The Argument from Intimidation,"  
[The Virtue of Selfishness](#), 139

The Argument from Intimidation dominates today's discussions in two forms. In public speeches and print, it flourishes in the form of long, involved, elaborate structures of unintelligible verbiage, which convey nothing clearly except a moral threat. ("Only the primitive-minded can fail to realize that clarity is oversimplification.") But in private, day-by-day experience, it comes up wordlessly, between the lines, in the form of inarticulate sounds conveying unstated implications. It relies, not on *what* is said, but on *how* it is said—not on content, but on tone of voice.

The tone is usually one of scornful or belligerent incredulity. "Surely you are not an advocate of capitalism, are you?" And if this does not intimidate the prospective victim—who answers, properly: "I am,"—the ensuing dialogue goes something like this: "Oh, you couldn't be! Not *really*!" "Really." "But *everybody* knows that capitalism is outdated!" "I don't." "Oh, come now!" "Since I don't know it, will you please tell me the reasons for thinking that capitalism is outdated?" "Oh, don't be ridiculous!" "Will you tell me the reasons?" "Well, really, if you don't know, I couldn't possibly tell you!"

All this is accompanied by raised eyebrows, wide-eyed stares, shrugs, grunts, snickers and the entire arsenal of nonverbal signals communicating ominous innuendoes and emotional vibrations of a single kind: *disapproval*.

If those vibrations fail, if such debaters are challenged, one finds that they have no arguments, no evidence, no proof, no reasons, no ground to stand on—that their noisy aggressiveness serves to hide a vacuum—that the Argument from Intimidation is a confession of intellectual impotence.

"The Argument from Intimidation,"  
[The Virtue of Selfishness](#), 140

Let me emphasize that the Argument from Intimidation does *not* consist of introducing moral judgment into intellectual issues, but of *substituting* moral judgment for intellectual argument. Moral evaluations are implicit in most intellectual issues; it is not merely permissible, but *mandatory* to pass moral judgment when and where appropriate; to suppress such judgment is an act of moral cowardice. But a moral judgment must always *follow*, not *precede* (or supersede), the reasons on which it is based.

“The Argument from Intimidation,”  
[The Virtue of Selfishness](#), 143

How does one resist that Argument? There is only one weapon against it: moral certainty.

When one enters any intellectual battle, big or small, public or private, one cannot seek, desire or expect the enemy’s sanction. Truth or falsehood must be one’s sole concern and sole criterion of judgment—not anyone’s approval or disapproval; and, above all, *not* the approval of those whose standards are the opposite of one’s own.

“The Argument from Intimidation,”  
[The Virtue of Selfishness](#), 143

The most illustrious example of the proper answer to the Argument from Intimidation was given in American history by the man who, rejecting the enemy’s moral standards and with full certainty of his own rectitude, said:

“If this be treason, make the most of it.”

“The Argument from Intimidation,”  
[The Virtue of Selfishness](#), 144

See also: [Certainty](#); [Logic](#); [Moral Cowardice](#); [“Psychologizing”](#).

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